Reminiscences of the Little Crow uprising /

A. W. Daniels

REMINISCENCES OF THE LITTLE CROW UPRISING.*

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BY DR. ASA W. DANIELS.

Considering the two thousand lives involved, largely women and children, the successful defense of New Ulm was the most momentous event of the Indian war of 1862–3. From that defeat the Indians turned westward and abandoned further combined raids upon the settlements. The active part taken by the citizens of St. Peter will ever be an impressive chapter in the eventful history of that city. Her immediate and generous response with volunteers, and their long and hurried march, enabled them to join in defending New Ulm in the afternoon, and later to participate in the uncertain issue of battle that held the beseiged in its grasp for a whole day. The command of General Sibley would have reached the city too late to save it from savage fury, and had not the response been immediate from St. Peter, Le Sueur, and Mankato, its fate must have been too horrible to contemplate.

Some of the events of that battle have never been fully stated in the official reports, and others not mentioned came under the observation of the writer. Therefore it will be of interest to learn, from one who had superior opportunities, the particulars of the battle as seen by him.

The news of the Indian outbreak reached St. Peter during the night of Monday, the 18th of August, 1862, it having commenced at the Lower Sioux Agency at seven o'clock that morning. Major Galbraith, who had reached St. Peter in the evening before, on his way to

Fort Snelling with a company of recruits, learning of the situation, at daylight started on his return to Fort Ridgely, which he reached in time to participate in its defense.

At four o'clock in the morning of Tuesday the writer was notified of the outbreak and was asked by Captain Dodd to go 324 to the Rounseville and Briggs neighborhood, six miles to the northwest, and notify the settlers, and he informed me at the time that messengers had already been dispatched in other directions. I was soon on the way, going from house to house, spreading the alarm, and sending others to more distant locations. On my return the refugees were already pouring in, and by noon the village became crowded with men, women, and children. Some had been attacked on the way, and bore their wounded with them. All were in most pitiable condition, having in their fright and haste taken little clothing and no provisions, reaching their destination completely destitute. Every house was sympathetically thrown open to the refugees, and was soon filled from cellar to garret. The vacant Ewing House, a hotel of fifty rooms or more, and an uncompleted store building, were soon filled, and being of stone afforded safety and comparative comfort; but many were compelled to resort to sheds and barns, or to remain unsheltered for some nights, until better provided.

A little more than a year before the outbreak I had located in St. Peter, having left the Government service at the Lower Agency as physician and surgeon to the Sioux Indians, after a service of more than seven years. I had visited them a month before and heard from them many complaints, principally against their physician, Dr. Humphrey. My long service among them had been satisfactory to myself and the Indians, and I had made many warm friends in every band, among them being Little Crow, and I may say most of the other chiefs. Therefore, when the news of the outbreak came, I was in great doubt in regard to its being general, but thought it confined to a single band, and that the outrages had occurred when they were under the influence of whiskey sold them by the whites. But within twenty-four hours my confidence in my old friends was rudely shattered, and I came

to realize, on seeing the dead and wounded, that the outbreak was general and of the most barbarous character.

As a government officer, I had observed for more than two years the close intimacy that was growing up between the Sioux and Winnebagoes. This was apparent from frequent 325 visits of large parties of Winnebagoes to the Agency, intermarriages that took place, uniting in games, and tribal pledges of friendship. No doubt some of the Winnebagoes participated in the battles that took place, but were too discreet to have it known. Had success attended the Sioux at Fort Ridgely and New Ulm, there is little doubt there would have been a union of the tribes against the whites.

My brother, Dr. J. W. Daniels, had served for five years as physician to the Upper Sioux, at Yellow Medicine, thirty miles west of the Lower Sioux Agency, and resigned at the same time that I did, both of us expecting appointments in some of the regiments going south. A few months later he was commissioned as assistant surgeon in the Sixth Minnesota Regiment, and soon afterward he was promoted to be surgeon in the First Cavalry. I received an appointment, but from domestic conditions was compelled to resign.

At St. Peter, to which we return after this slight digression, Captain Dodd and Major Flandrau had enlisted about one hundred and forty men to march at once to the defense of New Ulm. Many of these volunteers fled from their country homes in the morning, hurriedly disposed of their families, and bravely responded to the call for a thirty miles march before the close of their eventful day.

I joined them as the surgeon of the command, and we were on our way about midday. The men were armed with double-barrelled shot guns, a few rifles, and some other arms of uncertain efficiency. Some were on horseback, and a few in buggies; having to carry my surgical and medical cases, I availed myself of the latter conveyance. On reaching Courtland, twenty miles, a heavy shower drenched the command, but the march was continued, all being enthusiastic to reach New Ulm, where, refugees informed me, there

was a battle going forward and much of the town burned. We reached Redstone, two miles from the village, just as it was getting dark, and from that distance it did look as if the whole town was on fire; but, crossing the ferry, we pushed on and reached the vicinity of the Dacotah House about ten o'clock at night.

As we were leaving St. Peter we were joined by a command under Captain Tousley, of Le Sueur, of nearly one hundred 326 men, who continued with us on the march to New Ulm. With them as surgeons were Dr. Otis Ayers and Dr. William W. Mayo, father of the two distinguished surgeons at Rochester. It was midnight before we found quarters for the night, and then I shared my bed with Dr. Ayers, passing a comfortable night after a long and strenuous day.

Early on the morning of Wednesday we were looking over the situation as left from the engagement the afternoon before. On a vacant lot near the center of the town lay six dead, brought in from the scene of the engagement, and others had been cared for by their families. The physicians then visited the wounded and cared for them, and for some of the refugees who were ill from fright and anxiety.

During the forenoon of Wednesday, Captain Bierbauer came in with nearly a hundred men from Mankato, and a few men came from Nicollet, under the command of Captain Samuel Coffin. An organization was formed on that day by the military, who selected Major Flandrau as commander, Captain Dodd as lieutenant, and S. A. Buell as provost marshal. Pickets were established on the outskirts of the town, and guard duty for the night. During the day quarters and the commissary departments were established for the different commands.

A company of sixteen mounted men from St. Peter, among whom were Henry A. Swift and Horace Austin, afterward governors of the state, had started to the front some hours before the command under Flandrau was ready to leave, and had reached New Ulm in time to participate in the battle of Tuesday afternoon.

Thursday morning, after guard mount and after a company had been selected to dig rifle-pits, a company of a hundred men, under the command of Captain Dodd, was ordered to go to the Little Cottonwood settlement, six miles south, to bury the dead and rescue any that might be hiding or wounded. Dr. Ayers and myself were detailed to accompany the command. The doctor invited me to have a seat with him on his buck-board, which I thankfully accepted. The command had hardly made half the distance to the settlement before they were fired upon from ambush, but none were wounded, and, 327 after returning a volley, we continued our march. Three mounted Indians soon showed themselves, but at a safe distance, observing our course, and in derision waving their blankets, keeping in sight most of the time during the march.

On reaching the settlement, the saddest scene presented itself that humanity is ever called to witness. The massacre had probably taken place on the Monday before, and the dead were lying in all directions about the farm houses,—in bed, in different rooms of the house, in the yard, near the grain stacks, and on the lawn. During the three days that the remains had been exposed the flies had done their work, and as a result the faces of the dead presented a revolting spectacle. Trenches were dug, and the bodies were gathered together and laid within, blankets were spread over them, and a prayer was offered; then earth to earth, ashes to ashes; and the command turned sadly away, having witnessed a burial scene that could never be forgotten. On our return we reached New Ulm late in the afternoon.

By the military the day had been passed in strengthening the defenses of the town, providing themselves with ammunition, and fixing upon positions of advantage in case of an attack.

News came in during the day, of fighting at Fort Ridgely, and of Captain Marsh's defeat at the Agency, and many other alarming accounts from refugees.

The principal event of Friday was the detailing of one hundred and forty men, under the command of Captain Tousley, to go to Leavenworth, west and south of Fort Ridgely, expecting to find persons there unable to escape and that might be rescued, but nothing definite was known in regard to the situation there. Drs. Ayers, Mayo, and myself joined the command,—I again having a seat with Dr. Ayers. The route was across an open prairie, and we had not proceeded far before we discovered three mounted Indian scouts to the north keeping in line with us and watching our course. Late in the afternoon we reached the vicinity south of Fort Ridgely and for the first time heard cannonading going on there, the sounds reaching us at short and regular intervals. After its significance 328 had fully impressed me, I said to Dr. Ayers that the Indians had attacked the fort in great force, and that, as scouts had been watching our course, in case we continued our march to Leavenworth they certainly would withdraw from the fort during the afternoon or in the morning and cut us off. We had expected to remain at Leavenworth during the night, returning the next day. Dr. Ayers agreed with me fully, and rode forward and consulted with Captain Tousley, who called a halt and gave his reasons for doing so, asking of the command to express their wishes by a showing of their hands. It was carried by those in favor of going forward by two or three votes.

We continued our march for another hour, the warning notes of the cannon coming to us regularly; the sun was nearly setting, night coming on, and fatigue was telling upon the command, when a second halt was called and another vote taken, which resulted in an order to return to New Ulm. We reached our return destination after midnight, thoroughly worn out and disgusted from this long and useless march, which might have resulted not only in the destruction of the command, but perhaps in the capture of New Ulm.

The morning of Saturday was warm and fair, and at first we hopefully looked forward to an uneventful day. Much time had been taken in preparing for an attack, by burning outer buildings, digging rifle-pits, and loop-holding such walls as might be made serviceable. On

that morning Colonel Flandrau gave me a dozen men and I barricaded the avenue a little west of the Gross hotel.

From the roof of the Erd building, a central business block, with a glass an extensive view was had of the surrounding country, and at this point of observation a watchman was on duty during the day.

The first surprise and alarm of the morning came when at guard mount, west of the town, Lieutenant Edwards was instantly killed by an Indian so concealed in the grass that danger was unsuspected.

About eight o'clock a. m. the watchman from the roof saw Indians collecting some two miles west of the town, and signal 329 smokes from the northwest. His observations were confirmed by officers and others.

The certainty of a deadly conflict with a barbarous foe, when no quarter is expected, is a most trying test of courage, but, with few exceptions, the situation was heroically accepted. The women and children were hurried to places of safety, the command was got under arms, and the physicians selected rooms for receiving the wounded, Drs. Mayo and McMahon in the Dacotah House, and Dr. Ayers and myself in a store room on the opposite side of the avenue.

Within one hour the large body of Indians who had been forming on the west, were seen to be moving rapidly upon the town. The signals indicated a like approach from the north. When aware of their approach, Colonel Flandrau posted his men upon the slope of one of the terraces on the west, with a line of skirmishers in front. Little Crow was mounted and led his warriors, who were on foot. In a long line with flanks curved forward, they approached in silence within a quarter of a mile of the defenders, when they gave a terrific war-cry and rushed forward upon a run, holding their fire until they had received that of our men, and then delivering an effective volley at close range. The defenders fell back in a panic and the whole line retreated to the barricades. The assault was well executed, and

had it been pushed to its limit might have resulted in the capture of the town. But our men soon rallied behind the barricades and buildings, which arrested the onward rush of the Indians and compelled them to seek protection of the outer buildings.

Lieutenant Huey, with seventy-five men, was ordered to the ferry to prevent the Indians from crossing from the north side. Either from a misunderstanding or over-confidence, he crossed his command to the north side of the river, there meeting a large body of the enemy, retreated to Nicollet, and was not seen again until the following day. This unfortunate event was a serious loss to the defense.

The firing from both sides became rapid, sharp and general, the Indians gradually pushing their way in surrounding 330 the town, which they accomplished before midday. They fought with the utmost boldness and ferocity, and with the utmost skill and caution from every hollow and grass patch, and from behind every house and hillock or log.

The crisis came at two p. m., when the Indians fired buildings on both sides of the avenue in the lower part of the town. A strong wind was blowing from the east, and the conflagration threatened the destruction of our only defense. Colonel Flandrau rallied a sufficient force, and charging down the street, drove the enemy from the avenue. But just at this critical time the wind changed to the opposite direction, and clouds, which had been gathering for hours, shed upon our threatened locality a sufficient shower of rain to prevent the further extending of the flames.

The unfortunate incident in the day's battle that led to the death of Captain Dodd has never been correctly reported. In justice to the brave men that participated in that critical movement, a correct understanding should be had of the reasons that, at the time, seemed to make the undertaking imperative.

It will be remembered that Lieutenant Huey had retreated toward Nicollet in the morning, and all through the day we looked for his return with reinforcements, which really took place the following day.

About five p. m. there appeared beyond the Indian outer line, at the east, some forty or fifty men, marching in single file, under the command of an officer, carrying an American flag. They were dressed in citizens' clothing, and had all the appearance of the reinforcement so anxiously expected.

The Indians had again gained possession of buildings on the avenue east, perhaps five blocks from the Dacotah House, and from that position were delivering a galling fire upon our line.

Immediately, on discovering what all thought to be our reinforcements, Captain Dodd, in a short, impassioned speech, volunteered to lead any that would follow, to the clearing of the avenue of Indians and joining our reinforcements beyond. Rev. Father Sunrisen and Dr. Mayo both made brief speeches, urging all to unite in support of Dodd. Some twenty men fell 331 into line, Dodd and Shoemaker being mounted, and proceeded down the avenue. It was a movement of only a few minutes consideration, and seemed to promise an important result. Captain Dodd leading, the small volunteer force rushed forward with a cheer, hardly coming within the Indian lines before receiving a deadly volley, which hurriedly sent them back to positions of safety. Captain Dodd wheeled his horse and reached a log blacksmith's shop, when the horse plunged forward and fell. Partially supporting himself, with others assisting, the fatally wounded leader was taken into the building. A temporary cot was provided, where he was made as comfortable as possible. The building was loop-holed and a half dozen were firing from it, as it was one of the important positions on our outer line. Dodd had received three mortal wounds, two other slight wounds, and the horses ridden by Dodd and Shoemaker were both killed. The writer had witnessed from our hospital the whole movement, saw Dodd fall, and hurried to his assistance. There was little that could be done, as he was in a dying condition, surviving

only about one hour. He appreciated his condition, and met it courageously, giving me messages to his wife and to Bishop Whipple, with the utmost coolness and consideration. Thus passed a courageous and heroic spirit, a man of large mental endowments, and one whose life had been full of stirring incidents.

William B. Dodd deserves more than passing notice, as he was one of the most energetic, fearless and reliant, among the early pioneers of southern Minnesota. He contributed largely to the settlement and development of that part of the state. “Lest we forget,” it may be well to remind the present generation of some of the services he rendered the state and his home town.

He was largely instrumental in securing from the government the appropriation for the building of the Dodd road, from St. Peter to Mendota. He superintended its laying out and construction. He located the townsite of St. Peter, and from the first had the most supreme confidence in its future. He lived to see his wilderness claim develop into a thriving city, and he would have succeeded in making it the capital 332 city of the state had not his enemies resorted to the most infamous methods. He led two volunteer companies against the Indians, the first in pursuit of Inkpaduta after the Spirit Lake massacre. During the years of 1853–4 he was at times acting United States marshal. He volunteered for service in the south during the civil war, but was rejected on account of impaired sight. He was one of the delegates to Washington that succeeded in making his city a chartered point on the Winona and St. Peter railroad. He was a ready and impressive speaker, and had held several positions of trust from the state.

The party we had supposed to be reinforcements, upon the volley from the Indians and our men falling back, suddenly disappeared, and it proved to be a stratagem to draw out some of our men and cut them off. Had the Indians in the buildings held their fire until they had advanced a half block farther, it would have been successful.

In explanation of how the Indians became possessed of so many suits of citizens' clothing, it may be said that twenty-two months before one hundred and fifty suits were issued to them by the government, under the pledge of becoming farmers, much of this clothing having never been worn more than a few days.

The assault, commencing in the morning at 9:30, was kept up without interruption until dark, when the Indians withdrew in the direction of Fort Ridgely. During the evening all buildings outside of our barricades were burned. By ourselves and the Indians one hundred and ninety buildings were destroyed. We lost ten killed and fifty wounded, the small loss being accounted for by the fact that we were fighting from loop-holed buildings and barricades. The Indian loss has never been known. Both hospitals received and dressed the wounded, providing temporary cots for them. Some that were only slightly wounded returned and continued in the fight during the day.

Saturday night was anxious and disturbed with desultory firing by our guards, and perhaps by the Indians. Sunday morning it seemed from heavy firing that the assault was to be renewed, but it gradually lessened and by noon it ceased 333 entirely. About noon Captain E. St. Julien Cox arrived with about fifty men, accompanied by Lieutenant Huey with part of his detachment, who had been cut off the day before.

During Sunday afternoon search was made for the recovery of the dead. Three or four were found that had fallen so far out as to be exposed to any indignity that the Indians might offer, but none were scalped or otherwise mutilated. Jerry Quane, a St. Peter volunteer, had the totem of Little Crow attached to the clothing over his breast. The totem was the skin of a crow, preserved in its natural form, symbolic of his family name. The parting with such a treasured emblem was to boastfully inform us from whom the brave defender had met his death.

Early on Monday morning the order was issued for the evacuation of the village. Colonel Flandrau must have been wholly responsible for this move, as I am sure the medical

officers were not consulted and were entirely ignorant of it until a short time before the movement commenced. We had received reinforcements the day before, our position was stronger than ever, the sanitary condition did not necessitate great urgency in moving, and the volunteers would have loyally remained. General Sibley was at St. Peter, and would have arrived within a very few days, therefore it was a mistake to retreat from New Ulm until relieved by him. The route was a part of the way through a forest, and had a few Indians attacked, a panic and massacre would have followed. It is an ungracious and unwelcome task to criticise the colonel, but a truthful statement seems to demand that it should be done, in this respect at least. Nearly two thousand men, women, and children, took up the march for Mankato, thirty miles distant, bearing the wounded in conveyances. Fortunately the long march was uneventful and we reached our destination late in the evening, where we received a generous reception.

On Tuesday the volunteers from St. Peter reached home and disbanded. The writer brought with him Rev. Mr. Saunders, severely wounded, who had volunteered with the Le Sueur company.

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Some of the wounded were left at Mankato, but most of them came to St. Peter, and their care became most urgent. My brother, assistant surgeon with Gen. Sibley's command, assisting, we established a hospital in the court room of the court house. The room was large, well ventilated, and afforded space for twenty beds, sufficient for the most serious cases. The care of the hospital devolved upon me, as my brother left with his command two or three days later.

Of the cases that came under my care, the most serious were as follows: Mr. Summers, of Nicollet, shot through the spinal column, died. Rufus Huggins was shot through the knee joint, and, refusing amputation, died. A New Ulm volunteer, having a shot through the mouth, severing the tongue, recovered. A Sibley county volunteer, with a compound comminuted fracture of the arm bone near the shoulder joint, had amputation

and recovery. Rev. Mr. Saunders, with an abdominal wound, recovered. Mr. Bean, a St. Peter volunteer, with a shot through the face, fracturing his lower jaw, recovered. A St. Paul volunteer, with a penetrating gunshot wound of the brain, lived two or three years and died insane at St. Peter.

From the time the news of the outbreak was received, the citizens of St. Peter were active in providing for the refugees and the protection of the city. They organized committees for the various duties, as care of the sick, supplying food and clothing, and fortifying. Night and day guard duty was kept up, earth-works were thrown up, rifle pits dug, and barricades erected.

In the early fall the hospital was removed from the court house to the Ewing House, a hotel building that had been vacant for some time until occupied temporarily by the refugees. In January, 1863, I was succeeded in charge by Dr. Charles W. Le Boutillier, who was assistant surgeon of the First Regiment, and was captured at the first battle of Bull Run and paroled on condition of not again serving against the South. He died suddenly while occupying this position April 3, 1863.

During the fall and winter of 1862–3, St. Peter was garrisoned by two companies of the Sixth Regiment, and Kasota by 335 a cavalry company. This period was marked by the unusual amount of sickness. A few cases of smallpox occurred, first at Kasota, and afterward in the hospital; and cases of typhoid fever, diphtheria, measles, and scarlet fever, were frequent. Much of the disease was the result of the overcrowded condition of the city and the lack of sanitary conditions.

Through the next winter, of 1863–4, St. Peter was the regimental headquarters of the Sixth Regiment, under command of Colonel Crooks. This added to the already crowded condition of the city and was a source of increased unsalutary conditions. The quarters were without proper conveniences for personal cleanliness, crowded, badly ventilated, and without sewerage. The water supply was from shallow wells and soon became polluted.

The result was that typhoid fever, cerebro-spinal meningitis, measles, diphtheria, and smallpox, soon became epidemic, all taking on a most malignant type. Dr. Alfred Wharton, surgeon of the Sixth Regiment, had charge of the hospital, assisted by Dr. Potter. They faithfully and efficiently performed their duties under the very trying and adverse conditions that existed. Nine deaths occurred from smallpox, with a sad mortality from other diseases.

These diseases were not confined to the military by any means but involved the whole city, resulting in many families being stricken, the cloud of disease and death hanging like a pall over many households.

The loss of life in the Sioux massacre, according to an estimate by Agent Galbraith, which was made with deliberation and may be accepted as conservative, was 654.

The additional loss of life that was caused directly and indirectly by the outbreak, in the many settlements across the extensive frontier, has never been known, but must have been very large. From a somewhat careful observation, and from consultation with parties who had good means of judging, the writer is of the opinion that the loss from disease and battle, and that in the frontier settlements resulting from the outbreak, must have been as large as that suffered directly from the hands of the Indians in the massacre.

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In closing this paper the writer, who was so long and intimately associated with the Indians as a government official, desires to say that he found this people possessed of many of the virtues common to the human family, and that socially and morally their lives were of a standard quite as high as among many of the civilized races. The outbreak was induced by long-continued violation of treaty obligations on the part of the government, inflicting upon these unfortunate wards untold want and suffering. Like violent acts of mobs among civilized communities, the massacre was a barbarous and unreasoning protest against

injustice. Had the government faithfully carried out the treaty obligations and dealt with the Sioux justly and humanely, the outbreak would not have occurred.